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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION REACTION TO MANLEY REPORT PREDICTABLE

¶1. (U) Summary: The New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Quebecois moved quickly, and predictably, on January 22 to reject the central recommendation of the Manley panel to extend Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan. Their decision puts the onus on the official opposition Liberals to clarify their position. The Liberals, however, appear to be keeping their powder dry and have yet to respond officially to the report. PM Harper welcomed the report as "substantive and thoughtful" and promised to give it careful consideration, but did not indicate how he will deal with the issue when Parliament returns on January 28. The NDP and Bloc have now ruled themselves out of any part in the parliamentary "consensus" PM Harper has said he is seeking on the future of the mission, perhaps leaving the Liberals to determine its future. End summary

BLOC: "OUT OF THE QUESTION"

¶2. (U) Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe was unequivocal in rejecting the Manley report as giving the Harper government "carte blanche" to continue the Afghan war indefinitely. Duceppe said the report's refusal to state an end-date for the mission is unacceptable, and that his party is in "complete disagreement" with the Harper government over the extension of the combat mission beyond February 2009. He called on the government to advise its allies of Canada's decision and to shift its focus in Afghanistan to reconstruction, humanitarian aid and development. He urged the government to hold a promised vote in the House of Commons on the future of the mission as early as possible.

NDP: "WRONG FOR CANADA"

¶3. (U) Similarly, NDP leader Jack Layton rejected any extension of the combat mission as "the wrong role for Canada" and contrary to "Canadian values." After six years of counter-insurgency warfare, Layton said, Canada should be "drastically changing course" to help the Afghan people build a lasting peace in the region. NDP defense critic Dawn Black questioned the independence of the Manley panel, saying the participants were chosen to give the PM the recommendations he wanted.

LIBERALS: MUM

¶4. (U) In contrast, Liberal leader Stphane Dion declined to

comment despite being peppered with questions at a January 22 press conference. He said he had not yet read the report, but reiterated his party's long-standing position that the combat mission should end in February 2009 and argued that his party has "strong reasons" for Canada to switch to a non-combat role. "We have carried this mission during three years and it's time for Canada to do something else in Afghanistan," he remarked. Dion repeated the Liberals' three conditions for extending the mission: an end to the combat role, more training of Afghan forces, and a greater emphasis on development assistance. He refused, however, to say whether Liberals are prepared to defeat the government should Harper make the extension of the mission a matter of confidence.

KEEP OPTIONS OPEN?

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15. (U) The Liberals appear to be keeping their options open. Foreign affairs critic and former leadership candidate Bob Rae (who is currently running for a federal seat in a March 17 by-election) hinted the party might be able to live with the recommendations in the report. Rae argued that there is no need for Liberals immediately to take a hard position until they see how the Harper government and NATO partners respond. Manley recommended delaying a parliamentary vote until after the April NATO summit. Rae said much will depend on whether the government allows a full debate or attempts to "politicize" the issue with a snap vote as in 2006: "Let's see what the government puts up and whether it's compatible with our position." Liberal House leader Ralph Goodale agreed the party might let the government make the first move. "We'll see how it's handled and managed... we'll see how they play it," he said.

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COMMENT

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16. (SBU) John Manley's elevated stature among Liberals, and Manley's explicit references to Canada's assumption of a robust international role under a series of previous Liberal leaders, puts Dion in the awkward position of having to either reject the advice of one of the party's most respected stalwarts or backtrack on his own position. The Liberals split over Afghanistan in the midst of a leadership race in 2006. Currently all Liberal MPs are publicly onside to end the combat mission in 2009, but doubts remain over the position of deputy leader Michael Ignatieff and other Liberals who supported a continued combat role in 2006, and probably still do today. Dion promised on January 23 to "consider the options with an open mind." In the party's submission to the Manley panel earlier this month, Dion had made it clear the future of the Afghan mission is ultimately an executive decision, thus potentially leaving the door open to alternatives to a confrontation, including the Liberal opposition collectively abstaining from a vote, or other means to allow the government to decide the issue on its own.

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